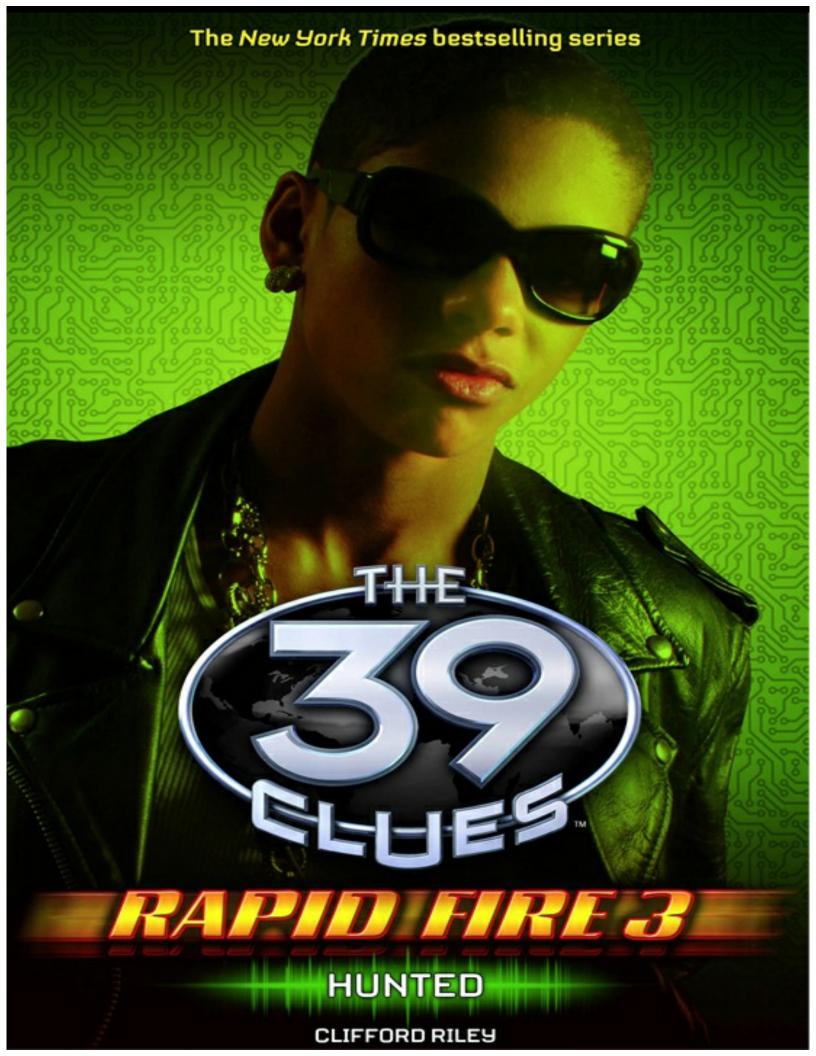
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#### The Clue Hunt

The walls of the watcher's office were painted a stark, blinding white. Others found the endless lack of color unsettling, even frightening, but the watcher enjoyed her sterile environment. She didn't need windows or paintings or trophies from past missions. She just needed one thing, the only thing in her office that broke the uniformity of the room — the panel of viewscreens opposite her desk. When they weren't in use, they blended perfectly with the surgically clean walls, but the viewscreens were rarely turned off. She was the watcher. And there was always someone to watch.

The watcher saw everything. She saw into the offices of politicians from every country. She observed five-star generals discussing strategy during top secret meetings. She heard the words and monitored the faces of thousands of unsuspecting people around the world. No one could escape the watcher's eyes.

Not even the Cahill family.

The watcher had followed them throughout her entire career. All of her colleagues had. No one was a greater threat to her organization than the Cahills. And now they were on the move again.

Not that they'd ever really stopped. The four branches of the largest, most powerful family in the world had been hunting for the 39 Clues for five hundred years. None of them — not the Ekaterinas, the Janus, the Tomas, or even the powerful Lucians — had managed to find all of the Clues.

But that was about to change. Grace Cahill, the matriarch of the Cahill family, was dead. And her death had kicked off a new Clue hunt, with teams from all branches of the Cahill family competing. Whoever was the first to find the Clues would become the most powerful person in human history. Or so they thought.

The watcher was sitting inside her office, looking through the latest reports on Cahill activity, a small smile playing across her face. Grace Cahill had been gone less than a week, and the Cluehunting teams were already creating mayhem that rivaled anything their ancestors had caused. Which, of course, was why they so intrigued the watcher. The Cahills were the best inventors, athletes, artists, and leaders in the world, and they had spent centuries using their formidable talents to search for Clues. They were very good at what they did. And the watcher needed good people.

It would be tricky, convincing one of them to abandon the Clue hunt in favor of other pursuits. But she knew that, to the right Cahill, the watcher's offer would have considerable appeal.

The trick was to identify the most promising candidate. Her employers needed someone malleable, someone who could be convinced to make the Clues a second priority.

One of the Cahill children.

They were more open-minded than their parents, and more talented, too. In spite of their young ages, many of them had already achieved far more than their adult counterparts. They were intelligent, strong, wealthy, and even powerful. Each one had the potential to make the watcher's employers very happy. But more important, their youth made them vulnerable. They would be drawn in by the tantalizing promise of something greater than the Clues. The watcher would make the right candidate an offer that couldn't be refused.

First, though, she had to eliminate any candidate who might jeopardize her employers' mission. She had to find someone with the right mix of talent and morals that were a bit . . . flexible. Someone her employers could count on to get a job done — no matter what that job might be.

After all, the Vespers only accepted the best.



Ted Starling felt a surge of victory as he pulled the car to a stop in front of the Franklin Institute in downtown Philadelphia.

"There," he said, pointing. "A Toyota hybrid."

"Lucky guess," his brother, Ned, said from the backseat, but he was grinning.

"The Cahill kids aren't in it," Ted observed. "Just their babysitter. Looks like they've been inside for a while."

"Couldn't have been that long," Ned replied. "We only lost them half an hour ago."

In the passenger seat next to Ted, his sister, Sinead, was already pulling on the door handle. "What are you waiting for? Let's go!" she said.

Sinead and Ned were Ted's fellow triplets, each with matching auburn hair and freckles. They were sixteen years old, but Sinead was technically the oldest. Only by a few minutes, but that didn't stop her from acting like she was in charge.

Amy and Dan Cahill had managed to lose them on the highway en route to the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, looking for a Clue believed to be hidden by Benjamin Franklin himself. They'd had a stroke of luck — there was no other explanation as to how they'd gotten here first. The Starlings were all geniuses, and Ted knew more about Benjamin Franklin than most Franklin historians, while Amy and Dan were younger, less informed, and not half as smart.

The triplets piled out of the car and made for the Franklin Institute. Ted's stride quickened as they approached the sprawling building he'd once spent so much time in. When he was a kid, Franklin had been his favorite inventor — the guy had discovered electricity and designed the first bifocals, after all. He was almost as talented as Ted himself.

Inside, Sinead went straight to a map of the museum and planted her finger on it. "There," she said. "Franklin Gallery. That's where the little orphans are."

Ted and his brother followed her without comment, but something was niggling at the back of Ted's super-powered brain as they passed through the halls.

"Ned," he said, "remember that time our parents took us to Philly for the weekend? And we spent a whole day in this museum?"

"Yeah, you spent half the day in the Franklin Gallery, quizzing the curator about Franklin trivia." Ned laughed. "He tried to have you kicked out for causing a disturbance."

"Yeah, but he was really just mad that I knew more about Franklin then he did," Ted said. "And then I got bored and sneaked off to try to get into the storage room. They kept more stuff back there, like the really old documents that weren't on display."

Ned's eyebrows shot up. "Documents written by Franklin?"

Ted didn't answer. "Sinead," he hissed, so that his sister slowed down to look at him. "I have an idea."



The entrance to the storage room was just as Ted remembered. Locked.

It was also right off a busy hallway, and on top of plenty of other visitors and a school group, the hall was patrolled by several museum personnel.

"I don't like this," Sinead said. "Amy and Dan are probably busy gathering all the information in the gallery right now!"

"You can go to the gallery if you want," Ted said, knowing that there was no way she would actually take him up on it. The Starling triplets always worked together. When the three of them combined their genius IQs, they were unstoppable.

"Just hurry up," Sinead grumbled.

Ted had his cell phone out, a special one he'd modified himself, and was aiming it at the lock on the storage room door. The lock was a typical model, nothing very sophisticated. Just a keypad requiring a five-digit code. The decoder on Ted's phone would have it unlocked in less than a minute. The problem was getting them inside without anyone seeing.

"Ned," Ted said, "I'm going to need you to make a distraction."

Ned rolled his eyes. "You get to have all the fun," he said, but he was already sauntering off, getting as far away from Ted and Sinead as possible. Ted aimed his phone at the door and heard a satisfying *snick* as the lock released. A moment later, his brother's voice suddenly rang out through the wide hall, drawing the eyes of every person in the vicinity.

Ted and Sinead pulled the door open and slipped inside.

"Too easy," Ted said.

"Whatever. Just start looking for Franklin documents. Anything that looks like it might relate to a clue. If we haven't found anything in the next five minutes, we're going to the gallery," Sinead said.

The storage room was pretty dark, but it did have some low lighting that cast a dim illumination through the space. Ted saw rows of shelves full of plastic bins labeled with numbers. He pulled one out, rifling through the papers inside.

"Looks like shipping records," he muttered.

On the other side of the room, Sinead was examining a large stack of gray plastic tubs.

"Christmas decorations," she announced, rolling her eyes. "Great, Ted. I'm sure we're going to find exactly what we're looking for in here."

Ted clenched his teeth but didn't reply. He checked a few more storage bins, all filled with useless information. A few times, his heart leaped when he saw the word *Franklin*, but it was only the name of the building scribbled across old invoices and memos to museum employees.

"Two minutes left," Sinead called from across the room. Frustrated, Ted became less careful as he looked through the contents of every file. How was he supposed to find anything in five minutes? He

started dumping papers onto the floor, snatching them up at random to see what they were, and throwing them to the ground when they proved to be unhelpful. Empty storage bins and their lids lay scattered among the papers that carpeted the floor. Sinead was probably right. Anything useful would be found by following the Cahill kids, not by looking through the junk in storage.

And then light spilled into the room.

"Hey!" a museum guard yelled from the doorway. "What are you — "

He never finished his sentence because Ted and Sinead were already in motion, charging at the man before he could take a step backward. Sinead pulled the guard into the storage room and shoved him back into a wall, planting a hand over the man's mouth to keep him from making any noise.

"Go, Ted!" she snapped. "Get to the Cahills. I'll keep this guy busy."

For a moment, Ted froze as he watched his sister struggle with the guard. He couldn't leave her. She'd almost certainly be caught and arrested, and their Clue-hunting team would be cut down to two. They needed each other if they were going to win this contest. But then Ted reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone.

"Hang on!" he called to his sister. The security guard was grabbing at Sinead's long auburn hair with his free arm and trying to use his weight to push her off. The man was bigger than Sinead, and she was wearing out fast.

Ted began entering commands into his cell phone so fast his fingers were a blur. If he could just rewrite this program quickly enough —

"Ted!" snarled Sinead. She was losing her grip on the security guard, who had slipped to the side and was flailing one leg at her, muffled yells emitting from behind Sinead's hand.

"It's okay, I've got it! *Come on!*" Ted gestured wildly at her and then fled for the door. For a moment, he was afraid Sinead would insist on sacrificing herself to save her brother, but then he heard a *thud* and her footsteps behind him. A quick glance back told Ted that Sinead had shoved the security guard to the floor. The man pushed himself up surprisingly fast and barreled after them. Ted

skidded on some loose papers, nearly crashing into one of the shelves. He threw his weight forward, steadying himself, but a large hand grabbed the hem of his polo shirt.

Ted's instincts kicked in. He whirled around and brought the side of his hand slicing down through the air onto the security guard's wrist. A loud yell of pain followed, and the man released Ted's shirt. Sinead was already in the hall, and Ted threw himself after her, slamming the storage room door shut behind him. He pressed a key on the keypad to lock it, and then he and Sinead were running away down the hall.

"What good is that going to do?" Sinead snapped as they went, slowing to a quick walk so that the people in the hall didn't stare. "He'll be out as soon as he punches in the code."

Ted held up his cell phone and smiled. "He's not getting out anytime soon. I wrote a quick program that allowed my phone to change the code on that door. They're going to have to break it down before the guard can get out of there."

A grin split Sinead's face in half. "You wrote an entire program in ten seconds? You really are a genius, little brother."

Ted smirked back at her, and they headed down the hall to rejoin Ned. It was still early in the Clue hunt, but Ted was feeling pretty good about their chances.



A short distance behind Ted and Sinead Starling, a silent figure kept pace with them, listening carefully. The watcher was pleased with the Starlings' performance so far. This was the first real test they'd faced in the Clue hunt, and Ted had done especially well. Of the three Starlings, he was definitely the most promising. The watcher had read about his many accomplishments and was especially interested in Ted's latest project — a satellite scrambling device that could disrupt communications across the entire planet. The Vespers could use someone with skills like that.

The watcher was less sure about the other two Starlings. Unfortunately, she could see now that she couldn't have just one triplet. They were too close to one another. If she wanted one, she'd have to attempt to recruit them all, and that could be risky. Unless, of course, there was a way to eliminate the other two Starlings from the picture.

Either way, Ted Starling had too much potential to ignore.



Jonah Wizard wasn't enjoying the city of Caracas, Venezuela, even though the fifteen-year-old hip-hop megastar had been excited to visit South America. His TV show, *Who Wants to Be a Gangsta?*, had aired on eight different channels in the last year, and there were more sales of Jonah Wizard bobbleheads in Venezuela than in any other country. It was nothing like Egypt, where he'd spent days trying to track down Amy and Dan. Nobody there even seemed to recognize him, let alone listen to his music or watch his show. It was shocking how backward some places could be.

But worse than the lack of fans was the fact that Amy and Dan had managed to escape Egypt with another Clue. The hunt had only started a few weeks ago, and already it wasn't going as well for Jonah as he'd thought it would. He might be a worldwide hip-hop sensation with fans on almost every continent, but none of that was going to help him win the Clue hunt. It was time to prove himself, no matter what the cost. And proving himself meant that no one could know he was in Venezuela. He couldn't hold a surprise concert in Caracas. He couldn't sign autographs for the fans. He couldn't even let himself be seen, or he'd never be able to get close to the next Clue.

Jonah's mother, head of the Janus branch of the Cahill family, had recently received information that pointed to a Clue hidden somewhere in Caracas. It was believed that the Venezuelan hero Simón Bolívar had been buried with it. A famous military leader, Bolívar led the country to independence from Spain in 1821 and his remains were now entombed in one of the country's most famous

landmarks, the National Pantheon. Jonah had managed to get this information from his mother, though she'd had no idea he'd actually been planning to use it. But with no new leads on where Amy and Dan or any of the other Clue-hunting teams were headed, Jonah had taken matters into his own hands.

Crouching low behind a bush, Jonah watched the entrance to the National Pantheon while listening hard for the sound of movement nearby. His contact still had five minutes to arrive, but Jonah was getting antsy. He wasn't used to being alone. Usually he was surrounded by fans, or backup dancers, or at the very least, his father was nearby. And the tight black shirt and pants he wore were necessary for sneaking around unseen in the middle of the night, but they clung to his skin, completely unlike the baggy T-shirts and jeans he usually wore. I hope none of my fans ever sees me like this, Jonah thought. It would ruin my street cred.

A rustling from a few feet away snapped him back to attention. Someone was coming. Jonah tensed but the newcomer said, rather stiffly, "I want to be a gangsta." It was the correct code phrase, but Jonah didn't like the man's lack of enthusiasm. Most Janus agents would have been thrilled to work with the most famous Cahill on the planet.

"'Sup?" Jonah said. "You got the equipment?"

The man dropped a large black duffel at Jonah's feet in response. Jonah unzipped it and peered inside, inspecting the contents. He nodded. "Looks good."

The man gave a curt nod and slunk back into the darkness. Once he was alone again, Jonah listened a moment, but the only sounds were a slight breeze and the rush of nearby traffic. Time to make his move.

From the duffel, Jonah pulled out the first piece of equipment — a grappling hook with a long line of cable attached to it. The hook's launcher had a very sophisticated sight, allowing Jonah to aim the grappling hook precisely where he needed it to go. He lifted it carefully into the air, peering into the viewer. The sight was also equipped with an anemometer, a device used to measure the wind's speed and direction. Jonah frowned. He was a pretty good shot, but the wind was unpredictable tonight. Even with this launcher, he could easily miss the target if his aim wasn't dead-on.

Before Bolívar was buried there, the Pantheon had been a church. It was a pale structure, covered with intricate blue-gray ornamentation around the windows. The Pantheon had three towers — two shorter ones on either side and one in the center that stretched high above the the rest of the building. Jonah's target was a small window on the tallest tower. As the final resting place of some of the most important figures in Venezuela's history, the Pantheon was full of guards patrolling the grounds at night — he couldn't exactly walk through the front door. But he only had one shot at getting the grappling hook secured to the window. If he missed, it would fall to the ground and be seen by the nearest patrol. His cover would be blown and he'd have to flee before Venezuela's favorite hip-hop star was caught trying to break into a national monument.

Jonah removed a rock-climbing harness from his bag and put it on, placing the straps around his body and checking to be sure that all the buckles were secure. Then he moved around to the side of the bush, holding a pair of night-vision binoculars to his eyes and surveying the grounds of the Pantheon.

Two guards were disappearing around the side of the former church. Jonah stood, planted his feet firmly in the ground, and aimed. The wind was gusting strongly now; the moment Jonah locked on to his target, the wind changed and he had to adjust to compensate. He couldn't seem to get a good fix on the window. But the guards would be reappearing soon. It was now or never.

Jonah adjusted his aim once more, then fired the grappling hook into the night air. Just then, the two guards reappeared on the far side of the Pantheon. The grappling hook made a slight whistling as it arced toward the Pantheon's window, and Jonah held his breath.

The hook went straight through the window and caught snugly inside with a soft *thunk*. Jonah clenched his teeth, waiting to see if either guard had noticed the sound. But they continued on their patrol without looking up. Jonah let the air out of his lungs.

He waited until they were out of sight again before pulling the grappling hook's cable taut and securing it to a nearby tree. Jonah clipped the carabiner on his harness to the cable and slung the duffel bag across his body. He was ready.

He reached up and began pulling himself hand over hand up the cable. Soon, his feet left the ground and his body hung suspended in the air from the harness. He wore thick protective gloves with a grippy coating that allowed him to hold on to the cable without slipping, but even so, Jonah was having a hard time pulling himself backward. He hung upside down from the line like a sloth, and he moved about as fast.

His biceps and back muscles started to burn and he wished he'd spent more time in the gym. His climbing harness would keep him from dropping straight to the ground, but it wouldn't stop him from sliding back down the length of cable. And the noise of the carabiner screeching against the metal cable would be enough to wake Bolívar from the dead.

Minutes passed. Below him, Jonah heard the sound of the guards making another pass in front of the Pantheon. He worried they'd see him, but he didn't dare stop. Better to get inside as quickly as possible, rather than be discovered hanging in midair, completely helpless.

And then a voice rang out through the air, shattering the quiet of the night.

"¡Hay un hombre en el cielo! ¡Mira! ¡Sube en el Panteón!"

"Oh, no," Jonah muttered. His Spanish wasn't quite as good as his French, but he knew enough to understand that he'd been seen.

Adrenaline charged through Jonah's veins as he yanked himself toward the window, higher and higher. The guards had guns, and he didn't want to find out if they were willing to use them.

He was almost there. Almost inside. Just a few more feet left . . .

And then he heard the unmistakable crack of a gun going off, and then another, and another. Jonah winced, expecting to feel the bullets plunge into his skin at any moment, but he didn't stop moving. His hand brushed the side of the Pantheon, and he grasped the window ledge, rolling himself over so that he was balanced on top of the cable. It dug painfully into his body, but more shots rang out, and a bullet buried itself in the side of the Pantheon, half an inch from Jonah's face. He let go of the cable, making a wild grab for the window with his other hand, and tried to haul himself inside. He barely fit and the duffel bag slung across his back slowed him down, keeping Jonah stuck in the frame. But with

the last of his strength, Jonah managed to shove himself through the window, and he landed with a hard *thump* on the floor of the tower.

He tried to get up, but found himself unable to move more than an inch forward. A surge of panic washed through him like ice water before he realized that he was still clipped to the grappling hook's cable. He reached to unclip himself, but the cable jumped to the side, away from his grip. And then it jerked upward, causing the grappling hook to come loose. Still attached to the cable, Jonah was pulled inexorably toward the window.

Someone on the ground must have grabbed the cable and was trying to drag Jonah back outside. Without the grappling hook in place, he'd fall straight to the ground, fifteen stories below.

Jonah struggled to grab the carabiner, planting his heels against the wall of the Pantheon to keep himself steady. The thick gloves on his hands made it impossible to unfasten the clip, and another jerk on the cable nearly pulled him straight through the window. But the duffel bag on his back kept Jonah from being pulled outside and bought him the time he needed to detach himself from the cable.

The guards on the ground gave one final yank, but Jonah was free. He launched himself forward, away from the window, and turned around just in time to see the grappling hook disappear over the sill.

Shouts could be heard from downstairs, and Jonah dropped his duffel bag onto the floor. He had only a few seconds before they found him.

Reaching into the bag, Jonah pulled out a pair of white slacks, a red jacket, and a black hat with a fluffy red feather sticking out of the top — the uniform of the Pantheon guards. Jonah pulled it on as fast as he could, not even stopping to remove the harness. Then he pulled the hat low over his face and descended from the tower at a run. He hoped the odd creases and bumps in his uniform wouldn't be obvious.

He nearly barreled into a guard on the stairs. Jonah yelled in Spanish, "The man went downstairs! Come on!"

The guard didn't even hesitate. He wheeled around, following Jonah's instructions. Relieved, Jonah pelted after him. But as they went down, his thudding heart slowed, worry turning into dread as they entered the ground floor of the Pantheon and Jonah looked toward the old altar.

The side aisles of the Pantheon held the tombs of many famous Venezuelans, and great columns stretched overhead into arches. Several guards and at least twenty people in Venezuelan police uniforms stood throughout the vast space, and about half of those were crowded onto what used to be the altar, guarding Bolívar's tomb. The vast marble floor stretched out before Jonah, leading up to the front of the Pantheon, where the bronze coffin of Simón Bolívar, the Liberator of Venezuela, was displayed on a white marble plinth, elevated several feet off the floor. Behind the sarcophagus, rising high above the floor, was a great white statue of Bolívar himself.

The lid of that tomb must weigh a ton, Jonah thought desperately. I'll never be able to lift it by myself!

The idea came to him so fast that Jonah didn't even think — he just yelled.

"¡Bomba, bomba! ¡Hay una bomba en el sarcófago del Libertador!" Jonah cried. He hoped his Spanish was correct. He'd attempted to tell the guards and police that there was a bomb in Bolívar's tomb.

Chaos erupted in the Pantheon. The police spit out rapid-fire instructions so fast that Jonah couldn't understand them. But he saw them forming up, preparing to lift the top of the heavy stone sarcophagus off.

Jonah pushed himself into a gap on the other side of the sarcophagus, jockeying for position as Pantheon guards and police continued removing the shroud over Bolívar's remains.

And then, there he was. Jonah gasped involuntarily, staring down at the skeleton of the most important man in Venezuela's history. It was mostly brittle, rotting bones, but some hair still clung to the famous leader's head. As Jonah stared at the skull, he felt as though the empty black sockets of Bolívar's eyes were staring right back at him.

Jonah Wizard wouldn't let himself be scared off by a dead man.

"¿Dónde está?" he cried out, hoping to keep the police in a frenzy. "¿Dónde está la bomba?"

Flashlights were shone into the tomb, and Jonah stared into it, looking for anything that might be a Clue. He had to find it. He *had* to, or all this would be for nothing.

His eyes flashed over the remains. There were scraps of old leather that must have been boots, the remnants of red and blue fabrics, faded and dusty. But then his eyes landed on Bolívar's hand — or rather, a carving on the coffin, just beneath the hand. Jonah couldn't see exactly what the symbol was. He would have to move the bones to get to it.

Jonah reached into the coffin and grasped Bolívar's skeletal wrist. A tingle shot up Jonah's arm and straight down his spine as his fingers touched the bones. He tried to move the arm out of the way, but the stiff old bones wouldn't budge. Gritting his teeth, Jonah grabbed one of the fingers and pulled. The bones were dry, almost like dusty, brittle paper against Jonah's skin, and he shuddered in horror. Then, with a loud *CRACK*, one of the fingers snapped off in Jonah's hand.

An uproar of shouts echoed through the Pantheon. Jonah flung Bolívar's finger bone away. Several police reached for him, but he pointed straight into the coffin and bellowed, "¡Está aquí! ¡La bomba, la bomba!" The officers hesitated, and that was all Jonah needed. For a split second, he had a perfect view of the symbol on the coffin — the symbol for lead. He'd found the next Clue! He could already imagine the excitement in his mother's voice when he told her.

He leaped backward and vaulted over the altar's railing, landing hard on the marble floor and crashing through the velvet ropes around it. Then he was running down the aisle, dodging the guards who tried to grab him and slamming through the doors into the night. His feet pounded against the pavement, legs burning, lungs gasping for air, until he reached a motorcycle parked just down the street, waiting for him. He jumped on, turned the key, and roared off into the night, the shouts of the Pantheon guards fading into the distance.

Even when he was undercover on a Cahill mission, Jonah Wizard traveled with style.



Jonah Wizard's escape from the National Pantheon was most impressive. The watcher had to admit that her expectations had been far exceeded. Especially since she was the one who'd alerted the guards that an intruder was attempting to break into the Pantheon.

The young Wizard had surprised her by passing the test. This Janus had far more than money and an appreciation for the arts to offer the Vespers. He had outsmarted armed guards and officers of the Venezuelan police force, performing well under intense pressure.

Perhaps he would make an excellent Vesper after all.



Everywhere Hamilton Holt looked, there was nothing but white. The snow stretched across King William's Island in every direction, endless. And he'd thought Beechey Island looked barren. That place was a paradise compared to where they were now — the middle of nowhere.

Ahead of him, his mother and father were making their way through the deep snow, their snowshoes scraping across the icy surface with every step. Ham's own snowshoes were old, with several broken strings. Even though he was fifteen, several years older than his sisters, he was having a hard time keeping up with them. Every so often, one of them, he wasn't sure if it was Madison or Reagan, yelled back that he was a slug, but their teasing had slowed as the day went on. Even suited up in their thick purple parkas, all of the Holts were freezing.

The cold didn't bother Hamilton. What made the Arctic difficult to bear was how there was nothing to distract him from his thoughts. He kept seeing things flash across his mind — kids tied up

in the back of a van, the blackened husk of a burned building, the murderous looks on the faces of fellow Cahills as they tried to steal Clues from one another.

The Clue hunt had changed everything. At least it had for Ham. His sisters still seemed content to follow their father, Eisenhower, around the globe, sabotaging the other Cahill teams and doing whatever was necessary to get the Clues. But Ham wasn't so sure anymore.

"Team! Halt!" The command from his father took Hamilton by surprise. The Holts weren't big on rest stops.

"What is it, sugar muffin?" Ham's mother, Mary-Todd Holt, asked.

"Binoculars!" Eisenhower barked, extending his thick, gloved hand. His wife dutifully reached into her pack and produced a pair, which Eisenhower rammed against his eyes. But he'd forgotten to remove his ski glasses first, and there was a yelp of pain and a muffled curse from beneath his balaclava.

The family waited in silence as Eisenhower adjusted the binoculars and peered into the distance.

"There!" he yelled suddenly. "We're not alone out here."

"Who is it?" Madison demanded.

"They've got a tent," said Eisenhower, "and a fire. We've been followed!"

Hamilton stomped forward on his snowshoes and took the binoculars from his father. Through them, he had a good view of three people, all sitting on tiny camp chairs around some sort of glowing orange device.

"It's a heater," he said, "not a fire."

"They're obviously after the Tomas clue!" Eisenhower yelled. "They followed us here so they could steal it from us." He took the binoculars back from Ham, stared through them one more time, and then passed them back to Mary-Todd. "All right, team! Battle formation! We're going in."

"Going in, dear?" Mary-Todd asked.

"We must stop the enemy." Eisenhower pulled his ski glasses back over his face.

"Dad, wait." Hamilton was surprised that the words were coming out of his own mouth. Eisenhower was, too.

"Wait?" Eisenhower said. He leaned forward, glowering at his son. "You're not afraid of these Cahills, are you?"

Hamilton rolled his eyes, knowing his father couldn't see his face through the ski glasses. "They probably aren't even Cahills, Dad. We should just keep going."

Eisenhower drew himself up to his full height. Hamilton could see him flexing meaty fingers through his winter gloves. "No son of mine is going to act like a cowardly shrimp! Holts! Move out!"

Madison, Reagan, and Mary-Todd all fell into formation, but Hamilton's legs refused to move. He stood there, staring down his father.

"They could be innocent backpackers," he said. "Or scientists. Or — or explorers. You don't know they're Cahills."

Eisenhower leaned forward and put his face very close to his son's. "Of course they're Cahills," he snarled. "No one else would be out here! Now get moving!"

Something hot was boiling inside Hamilton, something that wouldn't let him back down. He had done a lot of things he wasn't proud of during the Clue hunt, most of them on his father's orders. Grace Cahill's mansion was burned to the ground because of him. One of the funeral attendees had been taken away in an ambulance. And that hadn't been the last time one of Eisenhower's strategies had landed people in the hospital.

"You want to attack those people, fine," Hamilton snapped. "But I won't help you." He turned his back on his father and started to walk away.

Hamilton expected to hear his father's enraged shouts as he left, but instead, the air was silent for several seconds. And then, so quietly he almost missed it, Hamilton heard Eisenhower say one word.

"Traitor."

He almost stopped. His footsteps slowed, but something pushed him on. The word echoed in Hamilton's ears for a long time as he trudged away through the snow. He forced himself to focus on

getting as far away as he could.

It wasn't until he started shivering, even underneath his huge parka, that Hamilton realized it was getting dark. He looked up at the sky and then scanned the horizon in all directions. Nothing but the bleak snowscape, a few icy-looking mountains rising in the far distance. Leaving his family had been stupid. If he'd stayed with them, he could have controlled the situation, maybe scared the backpackers off before Eisenhower could do them any real damage. And then a worse thought occurred to Hamilton. What if those backpackers really are Cahill agents? They could be dangerous. His family might have needed him, and instead, here he was, stomping around the Arctic by himself.

Hamilton immediately turned around. He started following his footprints back, but it was dark and the snowshoes didn't leave very deep tracks. Wind was blowing the top layer of snow around in all directions, and soon Hamilton had lost his path entirely. All he could do was keep walking and hope that he'd pick up the trail again. Hamilton's stomach clenched. If he couldn't find his way back to his family, he'd be in trouble. His mother had been the one navigating the snowy terrain. He had no compass or GPS of his own. The skin on the back of his neck prickled as he thought of all those past explorers who had come to the Arctic like him searching for a Clue, only to freeze to death before they could return.

Walking back through the snow at night seemed to take ten times as long as it had on the way out. The sky was almost pitch-black now, except for the stars clearly visible overhead. The temperature was dropping steadily, and the chill of the Arctic cut through Hamilton's parka like icy knives. If only he knew more about navigating by the stars, he'd have a better chance of making it out of here alive. But astronavigation hadn't exactly been a high priority on Eisenhower Holt's training regimen. Hamilton could have been walking in circles for hours and he wouldn't have even noticed.

He looked back down and was startled to see a light not too far ahead of him, bobbing up and down. A flashlight! Hamilton started for it, picking up speed as he went. Maybe his family was looking for him. But as he drew closer, he slowed down. The man in front of him wasn't wearing a purple parka. Whoever it was, it wasn't another Holt.

"Hello?" Hamilton called.

The flashlight beam swept over and landed directly on him. Hamilton shielded his eyes and squinted, trying to see the man's face, but it was hidden behind a black ski mask. He couldn't even be sure the person was male.

For a moment, the two stared at each other, standing motionless in the night. Then the man turned and started running away.

"Hey!" Hamilton called. "Hey, wait!" He started after the figure, though the wind was blowing harder now, and Hamilton had to struggle against it to keep going. This person had to be one of the backpackers Eisenhower saw earlier.

Of course, the guy didn't seem too interested in helping Hamilton. It pained Hamilton to admit it, but maybe his father was right. Maybe that group had been other Cahill agents, trying to beat the Holts to the Clue.

As he ran through the Arctic night, Hamilton fought an intense battle with the wind and the snow just to keep going. The man was several paces ahead, just out of reach, and the way he moved through the snow told Hamilton he had a lot of practice with navigating frozen climates.

"Wait!" Hamilton yelled again. "I just — want to talk!" He was starting to gasp for every breath. Slogging through the snow on beat-up snowshoes was wearing him out, in spite of his Holt training. Hamilton could sprint for miles in the sun without slowing down, but the cold seemed to draw the strength right out of him. His sides were splitting, a feeling Hamilton hadn't experienced since he ran his first marathon at the age of eight. Whoever this person was, his training rivaled even Eisenhower's.

But Hamilton would not give up. He couldn't. This man was his only chance of escaping the Arctic.

He wasn't sure how long they ran. Hamilton's vision was a little blurry. Sweat was starting to drip from his brow, and the longer he ran, the less chilly he felt. In fact, his body was getting unpleasantly

warm inside the parka now. But Hamilton didn't dare take it off. He'd have to discard it to keep up the pace, and if he left his parka behind, he'd die in the cold as soon as he stopped running.

And then, without any warning, the man in front of Hamilton disappeared.

Ham ran a few more steps, then slowed to a stop, squinting into the darkness. The man he was chasing had been holding a flashlight, which made it easy for Hamilton to stay with him, but now the light was gone. Ham's eyes readjusted to the dark, trying to see into the inky blackness of the snowscape around him.

No. He couldn't be gone. He *couldn't* be. Another unfamiliar sensation gripped Hamilton's heart, as if an invisible hand had reached through his chest and started squeezing. It was panic. He was alone in the Arctic, and he'd completely lost any sense of where he was going. Hamilton was utterly lost.

He sank to his knees in the soft snow beneath him. Sweat began to freeze into icy droplets on his face, and already, he felt the chill returning to his body, creeping along his skin, settling deep into his bones. For a moment, Hamilton Holt did not move.

He wasn't sure exactly what made him look up. There was no sound, exactly. It was more like a feeling that he wasn't alone. But when Hamilton dragged his eyes up from the snowy ground, it took a moment to register what he was seeing. Because standing directly in front of him was an enormous polar bear.

Hamilton's mind seemed to have frozen along with his body. By the size of it, the bear was a male. They weighed on average 1,500 pounds, and this one was nearly as tall as Hamilton while still on all fours. But the most noticeable thing about the bear was how skinny it was. It may have been big, but it was clearly hungry.

As Ham watched, the bear lifted its front paws out of the snow and raised itself up on its back legs. It loomed above Hamilton, a towering white giant stretching toward the Arctic sky. The bear opened its mouth and roared. The sound echoed for miles in all directions.

Hamilton's heart froze in his chest.

And then the bear lunged.

Ham didn't have any time to think. He threw himself backward with all the force he could muster. His heart started working again, his survival instincts kicking in with renewed energy. Hamilton landed in the snow a few feet away, and the polar bear crashed into the ground, just missing Ham's leg.

Hamilton rolled backward onto his feet and started running as fast as he could, back the way he'd come. He wasn't sure how fast polar bears could go, but he knew they couldn't keep moving for very long. Their fur retained heat easily, allowing them to survive in such a cold climate, but if a polar bear ran too much, it would overheat, just like Hamilton in his parka.

Hamilton only hoped he could keep out of its reach long enough.

Behind him, the bear was galloping along, and another bone-shaking roar issued from its mouth as it gained on him. Ham couldn't move fast enough in his snowshoes. Pretty soon, he was going to be polar-bear breakfast.

Think, Hamilton, think. The bear was hungry. It wanted food. Right now, it thought Hamilton would make a tasty meal, but maybe there was something else, something in his pack that would interest the bear, or at least distract it long enough for Ham to get away.

Up ahead, Hamilton could see a small outcropping of snow-covered rocks. *There. That's the best place to get the pack off.* He could take cover behind the rocks, slow the bear down. All he had was a few dehydrated meals and some beef jerky, but Hamilton still thought there was a chance this could work. Polar bears were naturally curious, and tended to try to eat anything unfamiliar, which was why human trash was so dangerous to them. Maybe the jerky and some dehydrated chicken casserole would be enough to make it forget Hamilton, at least for a moment.

Hamilton reached the rocks and dove behind them without hesitation. The bear kept coming at him, straight at the rocks, and Ham knew he had only seconds. He wrenched the pack off and took hold of the zipper with his teeth — his gloved hands were too thick and clumsy to use — and then turned the pack upside down. His entire food supply came tumbling out. One glance up at the bear and Ham

didn't have any more time to think. He dropped the pack and dove to the side, fighting against the snow, which seemed to want to hold him back, slowing him down as his knees scraped against the frozen ice and rocks beneath it. At any moment, the polar bear would reach out and swipe at him with those huge black claws. . . .

But nothing hit him. Hamilton only dared to glance back once as he got to his feet. A short distance away, the polar bear was nosing around by the rocks, examining the dehydrated meals and nudging Ham's pack. Then, quite suddenly, the bear ripped right into the pack itself, sinking those sharp teeth into the material and shaking it back and forth. The fabric of the pack ripped apart like tissue paper.

Hamilton didn't bother to watch more. He raced away as quickly as his trembling legs would let him, and as he went, his mind began trying to make sense of what had just happened.

There was only one explanation. He'd been set up. That man, whoever he was, had tried to get him mauled by a polar bear.



Hamilton Holt had performed admirably. He'd demonstrated great athletic prowess, running almost superhumanly fast while wearing snowshoes, and he'd figured out how to distract the bear in time to avoid being mauled.

Even better, Hamilton Holt was obviously on the outs with his immediate family. Though the boy eventually rejoined them, the watcher knew it was only a matter of time before Hamilton got fed up with his boneheaded father again. The boy was smart, unlike the rest of his family, and he needed to be around people who were a bit more . . . stimulating.

Perhaps the next time Hamilton Holt stormed off on his own, the watcher would be waiting. Ready to welcome the young Cahill into a very different kind of family.



Even from his cold and dark hiding place, Ian Kabra could tell that night was falling. Soon it would be time to move, which was good, because he wasn't sure how much longer he could take this waiting. The water surrounding Angkor Wat was grimy and cold. Ian could almost feel pond scum creeping into every pore on his skin, and it took all of his willpower not to leap out of his hiding place and run screaming for the nearest five-star hotel. From the moment he'd accepted Grace Cahill's challenge, he'd known the Clue hunt would be demanding, both mentally and physically, but somehow, Ian never imagined it would be quite so filthy.

Getting onto the grounds of Angkor Wat without being seen had been difficult. As the largest religious building in the world, it was visited by tens of thousands of tourists each day. But Ian had managed to slip inside, pretending to be part of a tour group. He had, of course, come prepared, wearing a state-of-the-art wet suit underneath his clothes, which would keep him dry while he waited. He carefully surveyed the area, walking casually around the grounds near the temple's moat, even though the equipment in his backpack weighed so much that it made his whole body ache to carry it. When the moment came, Ian simply stepped off the side and let himself sink silently underwater, fitting goggles and a snorkel over his head as he did so. His heavy pack, full of five-pound weights, pulled him down, just beneath the surface. The snorkel stayed slightly above water, allowing Ian to breathe.

Waiting was a big part of the Clue hunt, but Ian could never get used to it. He tried to clear his mind and use the time to relax, imagining that he was back home in London, perhaps spending a lovely afternoon in his personal Jacuzzi while the servants brought him fresh delicacies from the kitchen. But his brain kept taking him back to the day before, to the reason he was here in Cambodia, visiting this temple.

His mother's shouts still rang in Ian's ears. *Worthless. Pathetic. Useless. No good.* The day before, his mother, Isabel Kabra, had spent nearly an hour berating Ian and his sister, Natalie, for their performance during the Clue hunt. It had been over a month since Grace Cahill's death had set the hunt in motion, and from the way Mum talked, Ian and Natalie were the worst Clue hunters in Cahill history. It had been bad enough to bear in the daytime, but after Ian went to bed that night, all he heard were those words echoing through his mind. And that was when Ian had sneaked out of his room and hopped on a plane to Cambodia. It was a true sign of his desperation that he'd accepted a business-class seat, the only one left, for the long flight across Asia.

No good, am I? he thought, as he stared up at the surface of the murky water. I'll show her just how good I can be. He was a Kabra, whether Mum liked it or not. And the Kabras were the best of the best, even among the Cahills.

The sky overhead was finally dark enough for Ian to risk looking around. He pushed himself up toward the surface, taking care that his face broke through the water gently. A quick glance told him that the temple had been emptied of tourists for the day. The night was quiet.

Once he was certain that the coast was clear, Ian dipped back underwater and opened his pack. He removed a smaller, waterproof bag from among the weights and pushed off, leaving the heavy backpack at the bottom of the moat. Then he climbed out onto the bank.

In just a few seconds, Ian had stripped out of his wet suit, tossed it back into the moat, and pulled on dry clothes. He was ready. With his smaller pack on, he made his way toward the temple.

The sandstone structure was magnificent. The Clue hunt had taken Ian to a number of the world's wonders, but each new discovery still filled him with awe. Ian had known the temple was gigantic, but that didn't stop him from being impressed by its size. The five towers at the center of Angkor Wat, each shaped like the bud of a lotus flower, stretched high into the sky, as if reaching for the gods themselves. It reminded him of the pyramids of Cairo but also of a huge, intricately designed castle, protected as it was by the walls and the moat.

And like the temples in Egypt, something about Angkor Wat made him feel like he wasn't quite alone. It was silly, but he could swear there was something in the temple's walls, in its floors, even in the air surrounding it, keeping watch over the grounds in case of intruders.

Ian suppressed a shudder. He could hardly believe what he was about to do.

For decades, the Cahill branches had been whispering about a Clue hidden in Angkor Wat. But no one had yet dared to look for it.

Ian knew why the normally fearless Cahills were so scared. The Lucian surveillance team had collected several images that sent shivers down his spine. Sometimes Ian tried to laugh at the idea of something so small keeping the most powerful family in history at bay. But there was nothing funny about that little carving, scratched into a door at Angkor Wat.

It was the letter M.

To outsiders, it was just vandalism. It had been slashed into one of the doors in the inner courtyard of Angkor Wat with a ferocity that could be seen in the jagged strokes of the letter.

But Cahills knew that it was the symbol of the Madrigals, the only group that had the power to stand against them. The mysterious Madrigals had terrified the Cahills for centuries. No one knew who they were or even exactly what they wanted. All the Cahills knew was that the Madrigals were not to be trifled with. Disturbing their territory to get to a Clue meant death.

And now Ian was going in alone. No backup. No way to call for assistance. Not even his little sister to help him.

That was how he wanted it. He was going to get that Clue. A little voice in the back of his head begged him to see how reckless this plan was, but Ian refused to listen. This was the only way to show Mum.

He could already imagine the look on her face when he showed up at the next Lucian council meeting and presented them with the Clue that had been guarded by Madrigals for decades. Ian would prove that he wasn't useless. That he was worthy of the Kabra name. He'd reclaim his status as the future branch leader.

His thoughts had brought him all the way to the exterior wall of the temple. Ian dared the use of his flashlight for just a few seconds, looking around for any hints. As the flashlight beam landed on the walls, he gasped.

He'd researched Angkor Wat on the flight to Cambodia, but nothing could have prepared him for seeing the temple walls with his own eyes. They were covered, from the ground to the very top of the temple, with intricate carvings depicting great battles and victories of Vishnu and other Hindu gods and goddesses. Ian could have stared at them for hours.

But he didn't even have minutes.

He kept moving, heading for the temple towers, toward the door with the Madrigal symbol carved into it. His heart thudded too loudly in his chest, yet he kept moving. He had no time for fear, either.

And then a shadowy movement caught his eye.

They were on him before Ian had any more time to react. Only instincts born of the years of training his parents had subjected him to kept Ian from being hit head-on by his shadowy attacker. His assailant was fast, deadly fast, and Ian felt the hard sting of a hand graze his shoulder. He dropped to the ground, rolling out of the way of another attack, plunging his hand into his pocket as he went, reaching for the tiny silver object he kept there. A dart gun.

The poison darts in the gun wouldn't be fatal, but they were fast acting. One dart would put a grown man out of commission in seconds. Ian was back on his feet, about to fire, when he heard a slight whisper of a sound behind him and dodged to the side just in time to avoid a second attacker. And a third.

*Madrigals!* Ian's terrified brain screamed the word, begging him to run away, escape while he still could. But instead, he ran deeper into the temple grounds, firing the dart gun as he went. He heard a muffled sound and then a thump.

Good. That might get them off his back for a few precious seconds, if he was lucky.

Ian threaded his way through the courtyard. He was having a little trouble navigating in the dark, but he didn't exactly have the luxury to stop and consult a map. He was about to make a run for it,

directly across the courtyard. Ahead of him were the towers, looming vast and tall only a short distance away, but then he thought better of it. They'd expect him to head to the door with the M. The only way to outwit the Madrigals was to take them by surprise.

Slipping inside a passageway, Ian stuck close to the walls as he made his way inside the temple. He needed to get up higher, find a different way to access the tower while keeping the Madrigals guessing about his location.

He entered a small chamber, thinking it might be a stairway, only to find shadows all around him. Somewhere not too far away, someone flicked on a flashlight, and Ian felt his body go rigid with fear.

At least ten figures, dressed entirely in black, surrounded him.

He would have to give up. Beg for mercy.

But the thought of returning home empty-handed filled Ian with a sudden fury that burned so hot inside of him there was no room for common sense, no room for rational thinking. With a yell, he leaped right at the nearest black-clad figure.

Ian was tall, and Clue-hunting had made him strong. Though the Madrigal he struggled with was even bigger and stronger, he hadn't been expecting Ian to attack. The tiny silver dart gun was still in Ian's hand, and within seconds he was pressing it to the man's neck.

"Don't move!" Ian bellowed.

The other Madrigals froze. Most of them were halfway across the room, ready to pull Ian off their fellow agent, but now they were motionless, like an action movie where someone had pressed the pause button.

"Give me the clue," growled Ian. "Or you'll be losing your friend. If he gets hit with more than one of these darts, he'll be dead in seconds."

For a moment, no one moved. Ian was sure they weren't going to give in.

But he was desperate. If he left here alive, it would be with the Clue.

The trigger of the dart gun felt cold underneath Ian's finger. He started to squeeze. . . .

And then, one person took a step forward.

"The clue is not here." A man's voice. "It was taken some time ago. We are only guardians, and we do not know what the clue itself is."

Ian stared hard at the man, trying to see his face through the darkness, but it was no use. There was no way to know if he was telling the truth. And Ian could see the other Madrigals shifting, just slightly, a twitch here, a flick of a finger there. They weren't going to stand still much longer.

It didn't matter if the Clue was really here or not. The crushing weight of disappointment — of failure — came down hard on Ian's shoulders as he realized just how bad his situation was.

"Stand back," Ian demanded. "All of you. Do it, now!"

The black-clad figures began to move as one, taking slow, cautious steps backward. Ian caught glimpses of some of their expressions as they moved, and what he saw chilled him to the core. The looks on their faces were not of fear or concern or even anger. They were almost . . . eager. As if they were enjoying this.

"Walk." Ian forced his voice to remain steady as he gave his hostage the command. To the others, he said, "You're all to stay in this room for one hour. If I see even a shadow, I'll pull the trigger twice. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," said the same man who'd spoken before.

Ian had to move slowly, his movements painstaking as he backed out of the room and down the hall. He couldn't risk losing his footing or letting the dart gun slip. His life depended on it.

They made it out to the courtyard, Ian straining his eyes to be sure he didn't see any new attackers. There was nothing. He made it to the outer wall of the temple, then out, beyond the grounds, over the wide, concrete bridge tourists used to get to Angkor Wat.

Ian squeezed the trigger of his dart gun once. His Madrigal hostage seemed to spring to life, but then he faltered and crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

Ian didn't wait to see what happened next. He turned his back on Angkor Wat and fled into the night.



The test was a success. The watcher had been instructed by Vesper One himself to create a particularly difficult trial for Ian Kabra, and when she learned that the boy was headed for Cambodia, she devised the perfect way to test Ian's skills. He had arrived expecting to encounter Madrigals, and as far as he knew, that's exactly what had happened. But in truth, the Madrigals had abandoned Angkor Wat some time ago.

The older Kabra child did not disappoint. He was by far the best candidate the watcher had seen. He had the cunning and skill to sneak into a well-protected stronghold on his own. He knew how to handle himself in a fight. And most promising of all, Ian was willing to do what it took to ensure that he prevailed — even if that meant threatening a hostage. The watcher liked his style. And she knew her superiors would be even more pleased with Ian's performance at Angkor Wat.

Back in her office, the watcher allowed herself a smile as she finished her report on Ian Kabra. As soon as she submitted it to Vesper One, she was certain the boy would meet with approval. Ian was far better suited to join the Vespers than any of the other candidates.

She had done well. Once the Vespers had a mole in the Cahill family, they would be able to set their final plan in motion. And everything was already falling into place, just as it should. While the Cahills were still busy running around the world, squabbling over Clues, the Vespers were silently preparing for action. Soon, they would come out of the shadows and demonstrate their true power.

The Cahills would never know what hit them.

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